

DEFINING OBLIVION

An Undergraduate Research Scholar's Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Rescuing Memories from Oblivion. (May 2014)

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My research consists of the analysis of the film *Indigènes* by Rachid Bouchareb. This film depicts the experience that Algerian and North African soldiers had while fighting for France's freedom during the German occupation. Through the analysis of the film, research into the history behind the film, and focus on the public's reaction to the film, I discovered why this film had a strong effect on the cultural climate of France.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to those determined to positively influence the world.

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I would like to thank the Melbern G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research for constructing a program that encourages growth and research within the humanities and providing me with an opportunity to carry out my own research during the summer of 2013. I would also like to thank my advisor, Dr. Nathan Bracher, for all of the constant support he has given me throughout this experience. I am exceptionally grateful for all of the time and energy you invested in me this year. Without your guidance I would never have begun my research nor would I have completed it. I also want to thank Mikayla Hall and Mason Morgan for being constant sounding boards for my ideas. Thank you to my family and friends for their never ending encouragement, and enduring my regular discussion of my research. Thank you all so very much.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Film is a special type of entertainment. It draws the independent audience member in and envelops them in their own unique experience. Each individual person walks away from a movie with a distinctive connection to the story and characters of the movie that they have just viewed. The very form of showing a movie in a dark, quiet theater encourages an individual viewing experience. With such a strong emphasis on the independent viewer's experience, how can we not expect films to have an impact on the way a person views the world. These artistic creations can wrench your heart, or cause your adrenaline to pump with something as simple as a pause in music.

Rachid Bouchareb took advantage of film's ability to impact people when creating *Indigènes*. His powerful directing and producing created a film that captured the attention and heart of people all over France, all while tackling aspects of France's history and culture that are commonly overlooked, due to the uncomfortable nature of the memories associated with them.

Indigènes follows the experiences of 4 soldiers in the 7th Algerian Regiment who are fighting for France's freedom against the German invasion during WWII. We watch them progress from their training to the battlefields of Alsace and Italy. The men vary greatly in background and joined the military for multiple altruistic reasons. Larbi volunteered in order to pay for a dowry, while Saïd enlisted in order to experience more in life than poverty and to prove his masculinity in the arena of war. Messaoud fights for the glory of

freeing his motherland from the Germans, while Abdelkader joined so that he may rise through the French military hierarchy and finally be considered an equal. As the movie documents their experiences in battle, the audience comes to realize that although these men fight for France's freedom as fiercely as native Frenchmen, they will never be properly recognized. Messaoud, puts it plainly when he comments, "German bullets do not choose". The final battle scene ends with Abdelkader being the sole surviving member of his squadron. Suddenly the film fast-forwards to an elderly Abdelkader praying at the graves of his fallen brothers in arms. He then returns to a small, cramped and dilapidated apartment. Text then rolls across the screen informing the audience that North African veterans like Abdelkader have had their pensions frozen and have yet to be recognized for their service and have been left to a life of poverty.

Because of this, *Indigènes* caused an outpour of support from the French public. The film's debut caused widespread discussion on the issue of integrating Maghreb populations. The president at the time, Jacques Chirac, promised that he would do something in order to make up for this tragedy. Pensions that had been withheld from colonial veterans were re-instated and memorials were erected around the nation to honor the fallen soldiers. A legislative act was passed requiring French history textbooks acknowledge the bravery of these men.

This support for North African veterans is rather unexpected in contemporary French society. One of the forefront social issues in France today is the marginalization of Maghrebi people in France. This is partly due to the tense history between France and its

former colony Algeria. The Algerian war was devastating for both France and Algeria and consequentially, the memories and experiences surrounding the Algerian War are usually ignored. Another reason for the marginalization of Maghreb populations is the significant number of major conflicts between Islamic and French culture. A prominent aspect of French culture is the separation between private and public spheres that make up society. One does not ostentatiously display religious affiliations, political opinions or personal morals and ethics in public, unless in settings such as protests where it is universally accepted. Because of such differences there is a clashing of cultures between North African immigrants and Native French. The majority of France's immigrant population consists of Muslims, and integral aspects of Muslim faith conflict with the French belief in separating public and private spheres. Religious displays such as women wearing headscarves clash with French culture and cause French Muslims to be viewed as "not French". There are many terms that have been created in order to categorize these people as foreigners. These terms include *beur*, *maghreb*, *indigènes* as well as other more derogatory expressions. The term *indigènes*, as well as the contested distinction between purebred French and second-generation immigrants (French of North African origins), commits the designated individual to a separate space where they possess peripheral citizenship (Coly 153). These names were originally formed in the colonial era to accomplish such separation but have recently been reclaimed by immigrant activists in order to suggest that the segregation of the colonial era is still perpetuated in contemporary France.

There is a common perception that French Muslims, even if they are born in France and have a native French lineage dating back for generations, can never fully be French. In

the French context, ethnicity refers most often to a way of defining oneself and of being defined by the other based on a single trait. Many members of the younger generation, born or raised in France, find it difficult to maintain the same kind of national allegiances held by their parents. Most often second-generation immigrants form an emotional attachment their family's origin, even though it might be more closely related to myth than reality. This relationship also strengthens the "them" against "us" perspective in France of both immigrants and natives. Younger generations experience ethnicity as a form of being different and discriminated against (Cesari 8).

Because of the public's supportive reaction for a marginalized group, it is important to explore the mechanisms that caused the film to have such a strong impression on French citizens. By studying the reasons why these films impacted the French population, we can see how films may be used as a medium that encourages the discussion of volatile cultural, social, or political issues and could possibly shape the cultural future of a nation.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

During the summer of 2013 I was a participant in the Glasscock Summer Scholar's program. Throughout the month of May and into the early days of July, I was immersed in the topics of "War, Memory and Diversity in France". I watched films, read literature, and entered into scholarly analysis of events and information surrounding this. This engagement provided the initial direction for my research. The Summer Scholar's program ended with a formal presentation of our findings. Throughout the summer I repeatedly viewed and analyzed *Indigènes*. The film and its director, Rachid Bouchareb, formed the basis of my summer research that would provide me with a foundation upon which to build my Undergraduate research. During the semester I analyzed multiple texts, academic journal articles, news articles, interviews and film reviews along with continued analysis of the film.

As I continued to analyze *Indigènes* I focused on the narrative that Rachid Bouchareb was illustrating through his directing. I, with the help of Dr. Bracher, later translated interviews done in French with Rachid Bouchareb about his films and his driving purpose behind their narrative. I researched the scientific process of the formation of memories and how films can affect a viewer's perception of the events it depicts. I then researched the history of WWII in France and the Algerian War and used historical texts, academic journals and first hand accounts to learn the events that occurred during these two wars. I also used academic writings and historical texts to research the role that North African soldiers had in fighting for France during WWII and the influence that the Algerian

resistance had on the Algerian War and the perception of North Africans in France. I did sociological research on the current social climate in France in regards to North African immigrants, the Algerian War and North African Soldiers fighting for France during WWII. I used cultural and sociological studies to discover the repression of the events of the Algerian War by those who experienced it and the political entities that were in power during the Algerian War.

CHAPTER III

Results

Historical and Cultural Relationship Between France and North Africa

During the World Wars France relied heavily on recruits from its colonies to form its armies due to their small male population. As French forces that made their way through eastern France and into Germany in 1945, two thirds of their regiments were made up of colonial soldiers. Between the German onslaught of May and June 1940 and the ensuing occupation and battle beginning with the D-Day landing and continuing until the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany on May 8, 1945, nearly 60,000 North Africans were taken prisoner and sent to camps by German forces. This placed colonial soldiers in a unique position during the campaigns of 1940, and 1944-45. They experienced fighting for their nation's independence but at the same time were still considered subjects under colonial rule and outsiders to major French society and culture. This difference in societal status manifested in second-class treatment of these soldiers. As the French Nation attempted to come to terms with the philosophical issues that arose from the World Wars slowly the actions and status of colonial veterans were pushed to the wayside and forgotten.

Throughout France's colonial period, they viewed their ruling of other nations as *la mission civilatrice* because of the belief that French culture was universal and would be applicable to its colonies (Coly 150). France also had a very unique relationship with Algeria. Although it was a colony it was also viewed as an extension of France, which

produced a sense of the French national identity regarding Algeria during the colonial era.

The Algerian War took place between 1954-1962. During this time the French government lifted many basic rights. Algerians labeled as rebels were executed without trial, there were acts of torture committed, mass executions and other horrendous behaviors that can occur during times of war (Le Sueur 170). The Algerian War posed a complicated question to French intellectuals. If French culture was universal then why wasn't it being accepted and implemented by the colonies of North Africa? How could France justify the violent and uncivilized behavior towards its own people? Therefore the process of decolonization was incredibly significant in forcing French intellectuals to re-evaluate the civilizing mission that France had pursued for so long (Le Sueur 170). This fundamental disruption forced the nation to once again rebuild itself politically and intellectually, after barely recuperating from the shock of the World Wars.

The Algerian War also demonstrated for the first time that North African people had the ability to have a major impact on Europe (Le Sueur 170). The war forced an "honest coming to terms" with the lack of universal appeal of French culture.

"The French-Algerian War was the ultimate litmus test for French intellectuals who were placed in the awkward position of defending the universal values of their personal, collective and national identities on the one hand, and, on the other hand, siding with a people who largely denied this universalism" (Le Sueur 182).

This identity crisis in turn added to the negative perspective that French citizens had towards colonial peoples. Along with the attitude that colonists were second-class

citizens came the perception that they rejected French encouragement to assimilate into popular culture and society, and therefore never would. This opinion would continue to intensify as more and more North African immigrants moved to France. After the Algerian War there was a large influx of immigrants into France due to the unstable environment of the newly independent nations. Their difference in religion, culture, language and physical appearance along with the low economic status commonly experienced by working class immigrants all led to the marginalization of North African peoples in France.

Another major impact the Algerian War had on former colonists is the rescinding of colonial veterans disability payments and remunerations. Before their pensions were frozen, African veterans were paid one-tenth of what was given to French soldiers (Coly 150). In 1959 a legislative act was passed in France stating that the pensions and payments of veterans from newly independent colonies would no longer continue. Due to the massive restructuring of France's relationship with its former colonies, there are multiple versions of the heroism and contribution of colonial soldiers. This in turn created a controlled memory that legitimates the French refusal to acknowledge and recompense the colonial African soldiers to the same extent as their French equivalents (Coly 150).

The Film

Bouchareb's film takes on the mission of reminding an entire population about a portion of history that has been voluntarily neglected. He goes about this by bringing the veiled history of the contribution of colonial African soldiers during WWII to the forefront of French cinema (Coly 150). His use of this topic emboldens the conversation of the role that colonial soldiers performed in occupied France and how "being French" should be extended outside racially determined limitations. Conventionally the colonial soldier is an anachronistic figure within the realm of French war memory. The memory that has been manipulated and canonized as official doesn't concede their aid, due to Algeria's declaration of independence and the war that complemented it. But Bouchareb's film places these men within the matrix of history permitting them to be established as figures with realistic memories and ties to the battles that they participated in (Coly 151).

The film strongly encompasses the issues of racial and cultural contempt, topics that are increasingly debated in France and continue to be a subject of dispute in contemporary Europe. His parallel use of past and present issues allows the trials of the soldiers to cross boundaries of time. The added aspect that the soldiers volunteered for patriotic reasons provides an emotional connection to their motivations. Their unbroken articulation of their yearning to fight for "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" bolster their self-sacrificing commitments.

The resolution of the colonists to offer their lives for their country also presents currently marginalized immigrants as having a right to be fully included into society. This confirmation helps to lubricate the process of universally recognizing immigrants and

second-generation immigrants as having the right to call themselves French. The close connection between the soldier and the immigrant critiques the nationalist xenophobic discourse of the extreme Right, especially their perception of the immigrant as an emblem of societal and fiscal burden (Coly 154). Boucherab states in an interview with Quenin from *Historia* that, “This film allows me to return to the past and shed light on the present. I feel French and proud to tell my story” (Quenin 70).

The film also disrupts theories about the dependence of the colonized on the colonizer, and reinforces the lack of universalism of French culture uncovered during the Algerian war. Although the film is placed within the realm of World War II it re-opens discussions and issues brought about during decolonization.

The public’s reaction of *Indigènes* carries with it the merit of having required the French government to reopen the case of the debt owed to African colonial soldiers (Coly 154). A facet of history that had long been shuttered suddenly burst forth into light causing an explosive awareness by the public, and requiring immediate attention by the government. The issues of ignoring and repressing the opinions of colonial peoples compounded with the current social state of immigrants and Maghreb people generated a mandatory discussion of the current status of non-natives within France. With one of the largest Muslim population in Europe, it was a discussion that was necessary for the government and its citizens to be able to function together cohesively.

The Power of Docu-Dramas

Famous French documentaries such as *Le Chagrin et La pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*) were created in order to break the taboo that surrounded divisive political and historical subjects (Austin 26). Documentaries and docu-dramas have consistently been used as a means to educate viewers of a particular subject, or unearth information that the director views as imperative. Steven Lipkin defines docu-dramas as “films that replace indexical, “unstaged” images with a quasi-indexical narrative” (Lipkin 2). Docu-dramas ability to break-up historical timeline’s and only include events that would support the theme of the film are what causes it them to be considered by Lipkin and “quasi-indexical”. These images in tandem with the films account form an inspired relationship to the events mentioned in the film. *Indigènes* use of historical narrative, period accurate sets and re-enactments combined with the inclusion of the ending text informing viewer’s on the state of North African Veterans, all allow this film to be classified within the docu-drama genre. Although the use of narrative within the film reduces the historical accuracy of the events illustrated, it emphasizes what is significant concerning the history that is being discussed within *Indigènes*.

The narrative of the men of the 7th Algerian Regiment is what causes viewers to become so committed to the real-life counterparts of Bouchareb’s characters. Coly suggests that, “The personalization of the history of the war through this focus on four protagonists with very different personalities and motivations for fighting adds dramatic interest to the film” (Coly 151)

Docu-dramas don't provide the exactness of historical documentaries, but they still provide a level of precision and veracity not conventionally found in fiction film. This integrated narrative feature provides a poignant characteristic to the movie, while the re-creation of historical events offers structure to what we understand history to be. The influence of Docu-dramas lies in their capacity to emotionally impact viewers. Because of their amalgamation of realism and narrative they carry the risk of dominating reason over emotion (Lipkin 37). This genre has the capacity to show audiences how events occur, without indulging in the details of when and where particular incidents took place. They prompt viewers to meditate upon how humans rule, fight, judge, suppress and overthrow without the interference of tedious details (Edgar 178). This overpowering of rationality also allows docu-dramas to act as forums for discussion of polemic social issues. Lipkin suggests that, "the emphasis on the personal, dramatic presentation of social concerns (rather than an analysis of issues as dedramatized abstractions) also allows for the framing of moral issues" (Lipkin 39).

The unique nature of this genre allows the film to straddle the line between total truth and falsification of history. In turn this encourages the viewer to accept the film as history while remaining unaware of the emotional influences that its narrative is placing on them.

Memorial Revival

The “Algerian Question” is primarily examined through a variety of media forms that are both artistic and informative. This conversation tends to be provocative as the periods considered are often still highly contested (McCormack 1129) since the traditional coping mechanism in regards to French history has been to simply gloss over past transgressions. This device no longer proves satisfactory though because of films such as *Indigènes* encouraging the public to scrutinize the gaps in memory and historical reflection currently present. 1997 was a key turning point in France addressing Algeria as an independent entity, and the regression of the occluded and inhibited memories and histories that encircled Algeria’s fight for independence. It wasn’t until 1999 that a law was passed permitting the term “Algerian War” to appear in legal texts (McCormack 1132). This revitalization of memory, and acknowledgment of the lack of recollection began in the 1990’s and was gaining attention when *Indigènes* debuted in 2006.

This memorial recovery features the connection between France’s unresolved memories and the modern social issues that the country is facing. The unearthing and discussion of the contentious issues has in turn forced the nation to reflect upon its current social issues and address them in tandem with re-opening the discussion of what transpired as the colonies sought freedom.

Bouchareb’s film had such a strong impact on the French population due to the recent restoration that the country had been experiencing.

The traditional model of memories associated with the World Wars and the Algerian War in France has been shattered and replaced with one that is elective, open, flexible, and regularly being reformed depending on the social, cultural, political or economical pressures of the present (McCormack 1132). The increased distance between present day and the events that occurred also encourage this memorial recovery. The separation between the past and present allows for a natural lifting of the taboo on the discussion of the Algerian War and the violence that is associated with it. This revival of memory towards events in Algeria and during the World Wars has facilitated discussion to deal with the issues, and films such as Bouchareb's have played a vital role in bringing these issues to the forefront of public recognition.

Importance

On October 27, 2005 two French youths were accidentally electrocuted as they were attempting to flee from French police officers. Their deaths incited over 274 French towns throughout the Parisian region to riot for nearly three weeks. These riots caused over €200 million in damage to the cities and nearly 9,000 vehicles were torched in protest. Close to 2,900 rioters were arrested, 126 officials incurred injuries, and there was one fatality, a bystander.

The French government's response to these actions was swift but pathetically predictable. They issued statements announcing this kind of behavior would not be tolerated, but did not actually address the tribulations that caused such a backlash from the rioters. The majority of the rioters were Muslim immigrants who lived in the French banlieues (French governmental housing projects). Their reactions to the young men's death were heavy with dissatisfaction with the society in which they lived in. Issues of racial exclusion, economic separatism, and illegal immigration perpetuated the activists and added fuel to the blaze. Rather than a simple protest against the unjust deaths of two delinquents, France became a hotbed for socio-political issues that had been brewing since before 1960. *Indigènes* debut provided an outlet for discussion of the deeper issues that incited such violent reactions. Films and media that discuss and illustrate connections between France's past and current issues are integral in allowing the nation to come to terms with what is causing such tensions to build between their citizens.

The issue of recognizing immigrants and their native French descendant is currently the cultural and political spotlight due to the current resurgence of Le Front National and the

2014 municipal elections. On February 17, 2014 France's current president François Hollande visited the grand mosque in France to pay homage to Muslim soldiers who died fighting for France during the two world wars, his first visit to any religious site since his election.

He directly addressed their families, commenting that France will never be able to repay the debt that is owed to these soldiers, and that the country will never forget the price that they paid. He also stated that no person should ever be threatened or assaulted for their beliefs (*LePoint*). Hollande also addressed the complicated relationship that French culture has with immigrants, but stated that he sees a bright future for the two distinctive cultures to thrive together in their population. This was a direct challenge to current political adversaries that were trying to gain voters for the French municipal elections. Recently Hollande experienced severe backlash towards his party, Le Parti Socialiste, and he replaced his prime minister, a popular political display in France that is meant to persuade the people that the administration is listening to their opinions.

After the municipal election in March of 2014, Marine Le Pen, the leader of Le Front National, was proud of the headway that her party was able to make in the polls. Le Front National is a nationalistic political party in France with anti-immigrant opinions. As of February 12 around 34% of France aligned their political point of view with the FN. In municipal elections the FN gained over 1,500 seats in town and city councils, which provided it with a strong platform for the European elections. Films such as *Indigènes* directly challenge the Front National and their negative perspective on immigrants. By

providing immigrants and colonists with a connection to their French roots and also recognizing them as important factors in shaping and protecting the nation they directly impact the Front Nationals ability to persuade citizens of the “negative” impact that immigrants have on France economically, politically and socially. These films encourage racial acceptance and tolerance in a country with xenophobic tendencies in the past (McCormack 1132).

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This film had a role in causing legislation to be passed in the French Government, a museum to be built honoring North African soldiers, and a general encouragement of conversation on the current social and cultural tension between French natives and citizens of North African descent. *Indigènes* may not have started the movement towards addressing France's social issues, but it certainly brought to light these issues and forced them into the public sector and saved forgotten memories. This film was not meant as criticism of France's actions and history, rather it was created as a reminder of what has occurred and what still needs to be improved within the Hexagon.

Bouchareb's film affected the French world because of the careful use of its genre, the scholarly revival of memory that occurred during its debut, and its use of characterization incorporated into the trans filmic aspects of the movie. The release of the film after the grand riots of 2005 had a profound impact on the acceptance of this film within France. The use of film as a medium for Bouchareb's message also increased his messages ability to garner attention within the nation because of France's reverence for the artistic power of films.

All of these aspects come together to explain why *Indigènes* had a sincere impression on French society and politics.

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